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ABSTRACT

Until recently, little scholarly attention has been paid to the art found in children's books. This study describes a project with a fifth grade class in an effort to increase their ability to critique book illustrations. Ten slides from picture books were shown to one experimental and one control group. Students were asked to critique the illustrations by answering two questions: (1) what is the artist trying to communicate? and (2) how well did she/he succeed? One week later both groups had a debriefing session where the writer/teacher showed the slides again and rated them good or bad, giving reasons for her/his decisions. The experimental group had eight more sessions during the year. Analysis of results focused on four items: (1) children's attitudes towards the rating and debriefing sessions; (2) the experimental group's response to the eight sessions on art in picture books; (3) patterns of disagreement with expert opinion; and (4) comparison of experimental and control group's reasons for rating. By the end of the project, children were begging to give logical reasons for their ratings, with the treatment group doing so at a higher rate than the control group. Neither group, however, seemed to grasp the importance of connecting the details of the artist's skill in creating the picture with what he/she was trying to communicate. Girls seemed to like "cutesy" art better than boys and all seemed to view anything different as unrealistic, weird, or not understandable. The limiting effects of a constant environment of artistic sameness in the schools is considered. (KM)

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Teaching Children Visual Literacy

Paper Presented at NRMERA October 3-5, 1991, Jackson, Wyoming

by
Lillian H. Heil

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Introduction

Children live in a visual world of TV commercials, computer screens, animated and live movie productions and a constant supply of new picture books. Browdy (1979), Nodelman (1988), Shulevitz (1985) and others maintain that it is important for children to comprehend the power of visual images. Browdy believes that aesthetic literacy is as important as linguistic and mathematical skill because children will be involved in making decisions about their visual environment throughout their lives. Children's picture books have been around for over 100 years but until recently have not been considered to be a topic for serious analysis. Several journals (*Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Spring 1984; *The Lion and The Unicorn*, 1983-84) and authors such as Shulevitz (*Writing With Pictures*, 1985) and Nodelman (*Words About Pictures* 1988) are evidence of the scholarly attention being given to the art found in children's picture books. This paper is a description of a project with a fifth grade class in an effort to increase their ability to critique art through picture books.

Method

In October 1990 children were introduced to a method of critiquing art by asking two questions - what is the artist trying to communicate and how well did he succeed? For example, if the artist wanted to portray fright, how ugly and scary was the picture rather than whether or not the viewer liked the content of the picture. Ten slides from picture books were shown to the experimental and control groups (5 judged to be good and 5 poor by the author and a colleague in the humanities) in October and 10 different pictures by the same artist in May. Children were asked to rate them on a scale of 1 (excellent) to 4 (poor) and briefly (on one line) explain their reasons.

Both the experimental group A and the 7 classrooms in control group B had debriefing sessions a week after they had rated the 10 pictures in October. The slides were shown again and children told whether the writer rated them good (1 or 2) or bad (3 or 4). Detailed explanations of the writer's reasons for ratings were given for two pictures - the bad picture (which large numbers of the class rated good) and the good picture (which large numbers of children rated bad). There wasn't much time for children's comments, but they were encouraged to look for details to support their ideas.

The treatment group A had eight more sessions of about 45 minutes each during the year. The first two sessions consisted of going through 2 more sets of good and bad pictures and answering the two questions about what the artist was trying to communicate and how successful he or she was. Children were pushed to tie the details of what they saw to the idea of what the artist was trying to do.The third session was a slide presentation on how artists use color, shape,

line, texture and value to create a certain feeling, and an activity where children tried to use these elements to make a picture showing excitement. Sessions 4 and 5 focused on how artists use symbols. Children worked in cooperative groups to find visual symbols in books and then the total class went through McDermott's *Stone Cutter* together to pick out his visual symbols. Session 6 was an activity making 3 dimensional pop-ups; seven focused on how artists show action and motion in picture books. The last session was on the use of color to enhance a story.

Analysis of Results

Analysis will focus on (1) children's attitudes towards the rating and debriefing sessions, (2) group A's response to the 8 sessions on art in picture books (3) patterns of disagreement with expert opinion and (4) comparison of group A and B's reasons for ratings.

Children's Attitudes Towards the Rating and Debriefing Sessions

Asking children to rate pictures seemed to create interest on the part of children as to how their ratings compared to the "expert." Some of the teachers commented that children liked being asked for their opinions. This interest was actually what initiated the project with group A. After rating and talking about the first slides, both the teacher and children asked if they could see some more slides and talk about each one. As children in all the classes heard the writer's rating, they would look pleased if they agreed and argumentative or disappointed if they didn't, but they weren't disinterested. Because the debriefing sessions were short, their main value was to provide children with a model of the critiquing process; the adult explained what she thought the artist was trying to communicate. With a good picture the details of what made it successful were pointed out; with a bad picture the details that didn't fit or distracted were explained. The disagreement over ratings didn't really matter; they simply provided the motivation for defending one's ratings.

Group A's Response to Art Instruction

These 24 children and their teacher enjoyed talking about art. As previously explained they had asked for more art sessions.These sessions of rating and talking about the reasons for ratings were lively discussions with children deciding what the artist was trying to communicate and then looking for details in the picture that supported that intent or detracted from it. They questioned the author's credentials - one asked if the writer were an artist. They were told of her liking for sketching especially on trips and she did bring sketches to show them when they expressed the desire to see them. (This was not one of the eight instructional sessions). After the third session on how artists use art elements (line, shape, texture, color and value) to communicate a particular feeling, they were a bit hesitant to create pictures showing excitement but they all tried. The writer gave specific feedback on each picture telling how they had used at least one element to show excitement e.g. The legs and bat are diagonal; the window breaking is like an explosion with glass going in all directions; the animals fighting have sharp teeth; one animal's body is on a diagonal line.

After examples of visual symbols in many different picture were found, the class went through *The Stonecutter* (McDermott) together and as is usual in discovery teaching, one child noticed something the writer had not - the second stonecutter has a different symbol than the first one does. It underscored the point that discovery teaching is never boring and the teacher learns new things too.

The classroom teacher conducted the activity session on 3 dimensional shapes; the children liked doing that so much that all of them proudly took the products home so no samples were collected.

Session seven explained how artists show movement; afterwards the class recognized and described 36 examples of motion in Mayer's *Frog Goes to Dinner* e.g. Illustrating the principle of showing action but portraying it just before it reaches the climax they noticed such things as:

the band member with his foot in the air;
the waiter who was about to put the plate down
the woman who had the fork full of food almost in her mouth.

After the session on use of color the class found 23 examples in *Arrow to the Sun* such as:

the halo or wing of the arrow maker give him a magical look
the stars are different colors - those closest to the sun are pink, blue and green and those are the colors of the Lord of the Sun
the dark shape of the mother shows up against the orange sky

In all of the discussions, the class looked for the details in the pictures which would support or detract from the purpose of the artist. These fifth graders, as is true of many upper grade children, seemed to have more confidence in their ability to critique pictures than to produce them. Discussions appeared to be less threatening to them than the activity we did in session three asking them to produce a picture with a feeling of excitement.

Patterns of Disagreement With Expert Opinion

All of the fifth grade classes had high percentages of disagreement with three of the ten sets of pictures shown. This is evidenced in Table 1 by the low ratings given to one good picture (expert opinion) and by the high ratings given to two pictures the experts judged to be poor. The rates of disagreement did vary per artist between October and May partly because the pictures were different. Group A (exp) and B (control) followed the same patterns of disagreement except for the set judged to be good. These collage type pictures (judged to be good art by expert opinion) were done in a stylized manner. The October picture by this artist showed two roosters fighting with feathers flying and a peaceful looking hen standing nearby. Both boys and girls in group A rated the picture higher than group B (total group A 2.79; total group B 3.29). There was not much difference between the ratings of the two groups of the same artist's picture shown in May (group A 2.63; B 2.69). This picture showed a large horse in the foreground whose legs and neck were elongated to produce the effect of flying motion and a stylized bird flying a little above and in front of the horse. The flat collage shapes gave little feeling of perspective so the bird could be perceived to be too close to the horse rather than in front of him.

Table 1

Disagreement With Expert Opinion

	Good Picture		Poor Picture		Poor Picture	
	Roosters	Flying Horse	Priest	Horse	Boy and Girl Dog	Boy on Beach
	Oct	May	Oct	May	Oct	May
Group A						
Girls	2.80	2.90	2.60	2.00	1.00	2.40
Boys	2.79	2.43	2.43	1.71	2.14	3.14
Total	2.79	2.63	2.50	1.83	1.67	2.83
Group B						
Girls	3.16	2.85	2.42	1.57	1.87	2.57
Boys	3.41	2.52	2.45	1.60	2.60	3.02
Total	3.29	2.69	2.44	1.59	2.23	2.79

Based on their written comments for October group A was more accepting of the bright but unrealistic colors used for the feathers; some of them liked the fighting and pecking and even one who didn't like it noticed things like feathers flying that made the picture explosive.
The May picture by this artist was rated higher by both groups so it is possible that some of the debriefing information about allowing artists to use fantasy if they wish had an effect on these fifth graders. Group B showed the biggest change from October (Oct. 3.69, May 2.69) but their comments in May were more specific about this artist. Most of those who wrote their reasons for groups A and B rated the picture as bad (3 or 4) and they explained why they considered it

poor art e.g. Eagles wouldn't fly that low; horses don't smile; the horse looks square; the ground has lines on it; horses don't smile.The May picture by this artist was not as well done and it was true that the horse's mouth was so stylized that it looked a bit like it was smiling; there were scribbly lines on the ground and in the horse's tail. What many children did not seem to be able to accept in the debriefing sessions (after rating the second slides) was that the artist had deliberately distorted shapes and used scribbly lines to show the motion of a fantasy horse. They apparently couldn't see any motion in it because it wasn't a realistic way to show motion.

Another set of 2 pictures (judged to be poor art) showed a priest ringing a bell in the October slide and a horse and rider making a sliding stop for the May one. The children responded more favorably to the picture of the horse than to the priest. Both were poorly done but the horse was better than the priest and certainly more exciting. Their responses indicated they liked the action and excitement of the sliding stop made by the horse even though the position of the front legs might have precipitated a broken leg in real life. Nor did they notice that the soldier riding the horse was not reining the animal as an expert rider would. They responded to the action and most liked horses. In a class discussion one child said he was looking at the shading showing the muscles and back legs on the horse which were done pretty well. He said he was not looking at the front legs (which were starting to do the splits instead of being parallel). The responses emphasized several things - children haven't learned to look at pictures holistically; they, (along with many adults) don't look closely and/or lack knowledge to know, for example how horses and riders move and the position they would be in if a horse makes a sudden halt and above all, most of them like animals and can't or won't disassociate this attitude from their evaluation of pictures showing animals.

The third set of pictures was taken from a popular coloring-book-bulletin-board series featuring cute, round faced, wide-eyed children with turned up noses. Girls usually like these pictures better than boys especially in the upper grades (probably because they show young children who are anything but tough). This pattern of a higher rating by girls showed in October with both group A (girls 1.00, boys 2.14) and group B (girls 1.87, boys 2.6). The October picture (in color) showed a little girl sitting and looking at a boy blowing a horn with all his might and his dog joining in by howling with all his might. Again, it was a better quality picture than the one shown in May. The girls thought it was cute, colorful and well drawn; they liked the way the dog was howling and the boy blowing the horn, the girl's dress etc. The May picture was black and white of a boy with goggles on his head, a bathing suit on and holding an open clamshell with a pearl in it. His legs were of a distorted fat shape so you had a hard time telling where the knees were and the legs then looked like they were bent the wrong way. In their comments children picked up on the distortions of the too large head, (which was discussed for this type of art in the debriefing sessions in October); many mentioned the lack of color and 7 of the 29 specific comments about this picture mentioned that all the children looked the same. In October debriefing sessions the writer had discussed with all groups the sameness of the looks of the characters as one reason for being bored with them. Evidently some boys and girls thought that idea made sense and while the girls rated the picture higher than the boys the gap between the two was much smaller. (group A girls 2.40, boys 3.14; group B girls 2.57, boys 3.02). However, they may have rated the picture lower because it was not

in color and the purpose was not as clear as in the October picture. Apparently none of them recognized the clam shell and pearl for what it was because no one mentioned it.

Comparison of Group A and B

The reasons for children's ratings were categorized into either general (e.g. good, cute, interesting, good drawing, colorful, not good, boring, ugly) or specific (e.g. cats don't do things like that; I like how they have the crib; there wouldn't be any animals on the moon). Because understanding and critiquing art require the viewer to scrutinize pictures carefully, the specific responses give more indication that a child is giving that kind of thought to what he sees than general responses which may be a snap judgment based on little evidence. In general each numbered response represented one child but not always; some children gave several reasons which might fit several categories. However, the percentage of responses from groups A and B (compared to the size of the respective group) provides one basis for comparing their responses to art.

Treatment group A were more responsive to art than control group B right from the beginning as shown in Table 2 by a larger percentage of reasons (A 86%, B 72%) for ratings and even more by the higher percentage of specific responses (A 22%, B 15%). In May, group B had lessened the gap in total responses (A 83%, B 81%) but not in number of specific responses (A 39%, B 20%). So the overall difference if response percentages for the total year is averaged does not show in the number (A 84%, B 77%) but rather in Group A having fewer general responses compared to group B (A 53%, B 59%) and more specific responses (A 30%, B 18%). As described in the methods section, instruction was given to both groups about focusing on what the artist was trying to communicate rather than if the viewer liked what was in the picture. Examples were given of an artist who enjoyed and was good at drawing spiders. It would not be fair or logical to rate his picture poor because the viewer hated spiders. Table 2 shows that both groups decreased the number of times they used words such as like, love, dislike or hate when they explained their reasons for ratings. Evidently some of them thought that focusing on the artist's ideas was logical as shown in Table 3. Critiquing art requires the critiquer to analyze whether or not the artist has succeeded in communicating what seems to be his intent. Evidence of analysis are approval or disapproval in terms of a logical reason rather than a positive or negative statement with no specific evidence. Statements such as "the fur looked real because the artist drew little lines that make a fuzzy look" or "the pictures shows excitement because the people are going every which way like an explosion." show the reasons upon which the judgment is based. Another person can then look and verify whether or not the reason makes sense to him. Table 4 shows the number of instances of analyses found in the fifth grade responses plus the statements because there weren't many of them.

Table 2

Number and Kind of Reasons for Ratings

	General		Specific		Total	
	Exp Group A	Control Group B	Exp Group A	Control Group B	Exp Group A	Control Group B
October (% of Group Giving Reasons)	64%	57%	22%	15%	86%	72%
May (% of Group Giving Reasons)	43%	61%	39%	20%	83%	81%
Total (% of Group Giving Reasons)	53%	59%	30%	18%	84%	77%

Table 3

Use of "Like" and "Dislike" to Explain Ratings

	October		May	
	Used "Like" Dislike"	%	Used "Like" "Dislike"	%
Group A	38/206	18	19/197	10
Group B	118/873	14	101/983	10

Table 4

Analytical Reasons Given for Ratings

	October				May			
	Group A		Group B		Group A		Group B	
	Content	Art	Content	Art	Content	Art	Content	Art
Picture 1			Animals wouldn't wear clothes Chickens aren't in desert Chickens don't like lizards			Crowded makes it look busy Focused on the duck	Swim-ming in desert doesn't make sense Some animals don't belong Has 3 fingers	
Picture 2								
Picture 3			Clouds should be hi in sky		Storm & wind but sun is shining not good		Flying boat Makes kids not want to go on a boat	
Picture 4				Weird color on chicken			Eagles wouldn't fly that low Horses don't smile	Looks like horse is square

Table 4

Continued

	October				May			
	Group A		Group B		Group A		Group B	
	Content	Art	Content	Art	Content	Art	Content	Art
Picture 5					Cats don't really do that		Cats don't wear clothes	
Picture 6					Dogs can't go to the moon (2)	Lines to show move-ment	Dogs can't breath on moon (3)	Express-ed space with color
Picture 7			Bell ringer would get knocked in the head			Horse slides on the road Lines are good (2) to show motion		Liked most lines Would be red but b&w so it wouldn't stand out
Picture 8	Stands out good			Shows what doing Doesn't need detail		Shows action by going L to R Action just before the climax	Police couldn't stop animal (3)	Looks like Moose is in the air Like its about to happen

Table 4

Continued

	October				May			
	Group A		Group B		Group A		Group B	
	Content	Art	Content	Art	Content	Art	Content	Art
Picture 9							All they do is stand staring in space like in a trance	Dog is big as girl
Picture 10					There isn't a chair small enough for a bee	Lines are calm and straight Lines to show it is fuzzy		
Total Reasons	0 1/24 =	1 13%	6 8/121 =	2 7%	4 13/24 =	9 54%	15 22/121 =	7 18%

Students had only a line or two in which to write reasons so analyses are abbreviated but both groups did a very small amount in October. Therefore, the percentage is based on the number of students in the group rather than on the total number of responses for the group. The overall percentage increased from 13% to 54% for group A and from 7 to 18% for group B. In both groups most of the content analyses related to students' refusal to suspend their disbelief and allow an artist to engage in fantasy e.g. animals don't wear clothes; chickens don't like lizards; dogs can't breath on the moon. A few pointed out logical fallacies in the realistic pictures e.g. the bell ringer would get knocked in the head; the boy has 3 fingers.

Group A had a much bigger percentage in art analyses (10/24=42%) than group B (9/120=8%) with comments such as: "the lines show movement," " It shows action by going left to right"(movement of the characters); "the lines are calm" (horizontal lines are used to show rest and calm); "the action is just before the climax" (a principle presented to them in one of the eight sessions).

It appears that because group A had more chances to participate in sessions of looking at pictures holistically (what was the artist trying to communicate?) and looking for details that supported or distracted from that purpose (how well did the artist succeed?) they did more of this when rating the final set of 10 pictures than group B did. Since they already seemed more interested in art at the beginning, their growth was probably greater than those in group B would have been if they had had the same instruction. Group B continued to confine their analyses to content and focused mainly on their quarrel with fantastic visual creations.

Discussion

Children were beginning to give logical specific reasons for their ratings with the treatment group giving a higher percentage of this kind of logical rationale than the control group. Some girls seemed to recognize that the cutesy kind of art that is so popular with the general population may become boring because of its sameness; however, the lower ratings in May by the girls may simply have been due to a poorer picture that was done in black and white instead of color. Neither group seemed to grasp the importance of connecting the details of how well the artist created the picture with what he was trying to communicate to viewers. Thus, most had not separated their liking for the content from whether or not it was well done and many would focus on one art element of detail, color, texture or line apart from the artist's purpose. However, the group trend showed their ability to recognize the better picture in a pair by the same artist, and they had at least begun to realize that it was more logical to give reasons than to fall back on "liking" or "disliking" a picture as a valid defense of one's ratings.

Perhaps the biggest questions are whether or not they can learn to use the holistic process involved in answering the two questions (what is the artist trying to communicate and how well does he do it?) and thus separate their feeling for the content from the critiquing process, and how long will this take? Certainly it will not be accomplished in a year's time. Can children suspend their disbelief in order to appreciate the fantastic in art? Can they recognize the logic of the distortions used by artists to intensify the purpose of their pictures? On a more philosophical level, what about Browdy's belief that they should be knowledgeably involved in making decisions about their visual environment? Can an appreciation of many styles of art help them to realize that there is no one model for an attractive appearance? Might art appreciation

help them to avoid the possible consequences of accepting one facilely drawn model for all cute little boys and girls - that consequence, a lower self concept for those who don't match that model? One thing is certain - if children never see a variety of good art, they will not realize that much of the cutesy kind in children's books are afflicted with the predictable sameness that makes it bad art. If cutesy children continue to be the mainstay of what teachers use for bulletin boards, children will tend to continue to think that it is good art. Even a variety of good art in books is not going to nullify the effects of a constant environment of sameness. Anything different tends to be viewed as unrealistic, weird or not understandable. Our social moires tell us that girls will like the cutesy art better than boys. Could this kind of sameness encourage girls to be slaves to any current fashion rather than developing their own unique style? Could it be part of the reason women spend such large amounts on their appearance? Does the "cutesy" ideal help boys to develop an erroneous view of what can be attractive and interesting in women? If women were thought to be much of the same mold as these pictures indicate, it is no wonder that boys and men turn to sports for excitement. But they can miss out too. They may never realize for example how similar athletes are to dancers in the way they move and a whole world of connections that artists are trying to communicate about life. These connections may be lost to a majority of the population because they have not learned to look at art forms or even realize that the insights into human existence are not mysterious or difficult to understand; they are available to every thinking person and are being presented for our perusal, questioning and dialogue in the art forms of its talented creators.